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Francis Dhomont: Electroacoustic Music and History

We have entered a new millennium; a fact celebrated by practically everyone apart from a few mathematically inclined pedants who are postponing their millennial celebrations until January 2001. Given that a significant proportion of the world's population feels little compulsion to even abide by our calendar, the symbolic value of such portentous temporal signposts is necessarily contrived. Nevertheless, the dawn of a new millennium will, inevitably perhaps, prompt a reflective consideration of the past. In a conversation with the French composer Francis Dhomont the electroacoustic medium's relationship with its past became a recurring theme. Dhomont's music displays many of the qualities found in great music: it is undeniably modern but the composer's past and his heritage is ever present infusing the musical discourse. Some might argue, of course, that the electroacoustic medium is fortunate in being independent of the historical burdens of other musical genres. But the term "music" implies common cultural, aesthetic and even philosophical issues. For example, our medium's reliance on technology is incontestable. But when has music in general ever denied its relationship with technology? Developing new instruments provides composers with new means of expression as much as an expanded sound repertory. In addition, technology allows music to be distributed beyond the concert hall. If technology is a principal element of electroacoustic music it cannot - and I believe should not - remain apart from wider historical and social changes. Thus, our history is as diverse, rich and even contradictory as any musical genre.

One strategy of establishing a healthy dialogue with the past is by hearing what established composers have to say. Some have made significant contributions to the genre due to their particular abilities and musical development. Thus, when an opportunity arises to talk to them it should not be missed. During February, Francis Dhomont was invited to spend several days in Great Britain. He was the featured composer at the Sonic Arts Network Conference in Newcastle between the 11th and 13th of the month. During the preceding week he was a guest of Birmingham University. In between these visits he diffused his composition *Phonurgie* (the fourth part of his *Cycle du son*) at the second "Fin de siècle" concert at City University. Though he confessed: "To be honest, I prefer the mixing desk in the middle of the audience!" the generosity of City University could not permit a complete

rearrangement of their performing space to accommodate his preference!). He returned there the next day to give a presentation on *Phonurgie* after an interview at the BBC for Radio 3. With such a punishing schedule it was fortunate that Dhomont found time to talk to me on behalf of the Sonic Arts network. He even abandoned the opportunity to be a tourist: "I have only visited London once before, which is ridiculous now we have Eurostar and it is so easy to get here. Tomorrow I'll be a real tourist!". I have to admit feeling guilty at interrupting this plan when, predictably, the next day it poured with rain.

Dhomont acknowledges his relationship with history in his compositions. This is surely an example of a secure composer who feels no need to claim priority in the medium's Revolution. Self-referentiality can be affected but in Dhomont's case it is the admission of the power and poetry of deeply seated memories both personal and cultural. His compositions have references to works by himself and other composers. Inevitably perhaps, Pierre Schaeffer occupies an important position. So convinced is Dhomont of Schaeffer's status that he asserted: "In my opinion, Schaeffer is a modern Phillippe de Vitry." This comment might appear obscure, eccentric even, until the parallels between the two musicians - separated though they might be by some seven centuries - are investigated. Philippe de Vitry was regarded as one of the foremost intellectuals of his age whose activities embraced not only music but also poetry. Schaeffer's polymathic activities are well documented. In addition, both men were not only composers but theorists. There is no obligation for a composer to theorise about his/her work: the music should do that for them. Nevertheless, theory allows, at times even encourages, a systematic investigation of materials and techniques. I believe, all compositions have this potential even if it is not made explicit by the composer. Thus, while Schaeffer produced his *Traité des Objets Musicaux* (a work whose significance still has not been appreciated by most instrumental composers) de Vitry wrote a treatise entitled *Ars Nova* (a term also used to refer to 14th century polyphony in general contrasting it with *Ars Antiqua* or the polyphony of the preceding century). Comparisons between the two acquire greater resonance when we see the methodology of both men. De Vitry was concerned with the classification of mensural rhythm and notation. His work was one of the most significant points in the development of notation. Previous theory was systematic but prescriptive and de Vitry's codification of rhythmic notation allowed an expansion in expression. It was one of those events which

changed everything. While notation was not a priority for Schaeffer, one of his tasks in his treatise was the classification of types of sound objects. This expansion of materials and the means to relate them adds credence to Dhomont when he suggested: “Musique concrète is the Ars Nova of the twentieth century.” Moreover, the ability to develop and explain theory is necessary for teachers and teaching is something at which Dhomont clearly excels. “I love teaching and many former students have become good friends. I see them as colleagues rather than students.”

Dhomont’s admiration for Schaeffer is genuine and heartfelt. It is, therefore, all the more interesting to learn that his initial experiments with sound and technology were initially conducted in complete isolation in the south of France. As a young composer with some local success he began experimenting with tape recorders. Like many of his generation who became fascinated by the possibilities that analogue equipment revealed, basic transformations such as tape reversal and acceleration or deceleration of playback speed have potential for musicians who are sensitive to such sounds. “The tape recorder was a Webster. It was an old machine and not very good.” In addition, true to the notion of analogue techniques as craft as much as if not more than art the actual mechanics of the equipment had to be considered. “For example, I’m not really interested in computers. But I had to learn how to repair these machines (ie the Webster tape recorder) as there were hardly any spare parts available”. Only later whilst living in Paris did Dhomont hear that others had also experimenting with such equipment. “I heard the works of Schaeffer and Henry, but this was after I had experimented with tape recorders myself.” Later Dhomont studied with Schaeffer and at the GRM. This continued his studies with teachers who were highly trained individuals. Teachers such as Koechlin enabled Dhomont to continue to study the traditional repertoire. “Debussy was a particularly important composer for me.”

Dhomont’s background led him to be acutely aware of the power of literature “My father was a poet but not a career”. The power of memory and its role in recalling and recreating the past is particularly evident in authors admired by Dhomont. When I asked if the writers of the OuLiPo group with their elaborate language games and reliance on highly organised, artificial methods of production he shook his head and replied: “Writers like Gide and Proust were more important for me.” The latter, on reflection, is an obvious choice. The self

analytical style favoured by Proust is adapted by Dhomont in works such as *Forêt profonde*. The notion of the forest as a metaphor for the mind is compelling “I see the forest as a symbol. But it’s not just the trees there is also the undergrowth. Things are hidden, things we’re not really aware of”. The use of fairy tales in various languages is a wonderful device. It encourages an ambivalence: the listener recalls personal memories but simultaneously in traditional fairy tales there is also reference to deeper, often darker tales. They become myths tapping into a collective unconscious. These depths, ripe for psychoanalytical treatment are often lost today. Many children are first acquainted with Snow White, Pinocchio and Alice in Wonderland in the mind-numbingly anodyne versions by Walt Disney which strips them of all emotional and even sexual resonance. But Dhomont restores these tales to their original power in a work that shares radiophonic as well as musical approaches.

Dhomont continues to compose with undiminished enthusiasm and inventiveness. He is a direct link to the early days of discovery.